United Nations A/HRC/25/NGO/70

General Assembly

Distr.: General
26 February 2014

English only

Human Rights Council
Twenty-fifth session
Agenda item 8
Follow-up and implementation of the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action

Written statement* submitted by the International Humanist and Ethical Union, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[17 February 2014]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

Global violence against women in the name of "Honour"

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women[1], now ratified by 187 states, obliges States parties to "pursue by all appropriate means and without delay a policy of eliminating discrimination against women". Article 1 of the UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women proclaims "the term 'violence against women' means any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women"[2]. The Platform for Action on Women's Human Rights from the UN's Fourth World Conference on Women urges states to eliminate violence against women, "which is a human rights violation resulting from harmful traditional or customary practices, cultural prejudices and extremism"[3]. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights asserts that "every human being has the inherent right to life" in addition to "the right to liberty and security of person"[4].

Despite this, continued extreme violence against women occurs across the globe. Much of this violence is motivated and excused by a misguided notion of "honour".

Defining "honour-based violence"

Honour-based violence is understood to derive from a desire to control the behaviour of women and girls within a community. Most often with an emphasis on her sexuality, there are many forms of behaviour under scrutiny, including dress, communication with men and sexual relationships. Victims of honour violence are targeted because their behaviour is seen to violate cultural or religious norms; where their assailant feels the only way to prevent such behaviour or restore family honour is to harm or kill the victim.

Ultimately, such an interpretation of honour is grounded in an objectification of the woman, with the honour of a family vested in her body. As the Special Rapporteur on violence against women has pointed out, preserving honour turns on the idea that a woman has to be sexually controlled until marriage; it is a means of controlling her choices, particularly in terms of sexuality and freedom of movement5.

Honour violence occurs in patriarchal communities where male status and family status are prioritised[6]. Honour crimes often have a collective dimension, being planned by several family members. They are often public, an aspect "integral to their social functions, which include influencing the conduct of other women"[7].

Honour-based violence has been reported in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Brazil, Canada, Ecuador, Egypt, France, Germany, India, Iraq, Iran, Italy, Jordan, Morocco, Pakistan, Sweden, Turkey, Uganda, United Kingdom, and the United States[8].

"Honour killings"

Whilst there are a number of forms of honour crimes, including bodily mutilation and acid violence, amongst the most severe manifestations is killing in the name of honour. Victims are buried alive, burned, shot, smothered, stabbed,

---

[1] http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/cedaw.htm, Article 2.
[2] http://www.un.org/documents/ga/res/48/a48r104.htm, Article 1.
[3] http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/platform/human.htm, §232 (g).
[4] http://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/ccpr.aspx, Article 6.1.
[5] A/HRC/20/16.
[6] "Culture of Discrimination: A Fact Sheet on "Honor" Killings", *Amnesty International,* 2012.
[7] *Ending Violence against Women*, Study of the Secretary General, 2006, p33.
[8] http://www.honordiaries.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/HonorKillingEuropeHDFactSheetfinal.pdf; "Thousands of Women Killed for Family 'Honor'", Hillary Mayell, February 2002, http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2002/02/0212_020212_honorkilling.html

stoned, and strangled to death[9]. Women have been murdered for a variety of reasons, including: talking to an unrelated man, tweeting or facebooking, refusing an arranged marriage, seeking a divorce, or disobeying her husband or father[10]. Women have even been punished for having previously suffered sexual assault or rape[11].

The UN has estimated that 5,000 women are murdered by family members each year in "honour killings"[12] but according to women's advocacy groups the figure could be around 20,000. In general, given the difficulty surrounding the reporting of these crimes, official statistics are understood to be grossly underreported[13].

Honour killings have been identified in Muslim, Hindu and Sikh communities across the world; both India and Pakistan are estimated to have 1,000 honour killings per year[14].

Not only are honour killings numerous, but killings committed in the name of honour are done so with high levels of impunity in many places[15]. In a number of countries, honour-related crimes are rarely investigated and the law rarely enforced. When enforced, the sentences can be far less than those for equally violent crimes without the honour dimension[16]. For example, in Iran and Jordan the law protects men who murder their wives for adultery[17]. Societal attitudes are also deeply problematic; those who commit honour violence believe that their conduct is justified and receive support from their community[18]. For example, in Jordan, a third of teenagers believe that honour killings are justifiable[19], and in Iraq, 68% of young Iraqi men believe that killing a girl for dishonouring the family is justifiable[20].

There are other forms of violence that are committed against women in the name of honour, which also come about from a preoccupation with women's sexuality and a desire to enforce chastity; for example, the practice of female genital mutilation (FGM) and forced marriage. Both of these practices can do severe physiological and psychological damage to women and girls. Part of what underscores both of these practices is the desire to ensure female virginity as a basis for a family's honour.

Female genital mutilation

The practice of FGM is seen as necessary to preserve a girl's honour and as a desirable proof of virginity and cleanliness. There is also a belief that FGM can reduce a woman's libido, and thus the chances of her having pre- or extra-marital sex[21]. FGM ranges from cutting off a girl's clitoris to cutting off all of her external genitalia. There are 140

[9] "Impunity for domestic violence, 'honour killings' cannot continue" UN, March 2010, http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=33971&Cr=violence+against+women&Cr1#.UKpKmrukGM4

[10] Chintamani Rout, "Honour Killing: Descend and Dimensions", *International Journal of Political Science and International Relations*, Volume 2, Issue 1. June 2012, p.18; "Culture of Discrimination: A Fact Sheet on "Honor" Killings", *Amnesty International*, 2012.

[11] BBC. Ethics Guide, Honor Crimes, 2012. http://www.bbc.co.uk/ethics/honourcrimes/crimesofhonour_1.shtml

[12] https://www.unfpa.org/swp/2000/english/notes.html#3-31.

[13] A/HRC/20/16.

[14] Honor Based Violence Awareness Network, http://hbv-awareness.com/faq/; " 1,000 Pakistani women and girls honour killing victims", *Telegraph*, 22nd March, 2012, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/pakistan/9160515/1000-Pakistani-women-and-girls-honour-killing-victims.html.

15 A/HRC/20/16.

[16] A/65/44, §60 and §63.

[17] "Report: Honor Killing in Iran", *Land Info Country of Origin Information Centre*, May 2009. http://www.landinfo.no/asset/960/1/960_1.pdf; Sherifa Zahur, "Criminal Law, Sexuality, and Women in the Middle East" in Pinar Ilkkaracan (ed.), *Deconstructing sexuality in the Middle East* (Ashgate Publishing Company. Burlington, USA, 2008), p.23.

[18] "Culture of Discrimination: A Fact Sheet on "Honor" Killings", *Amnesty International*, 2012.

[19] "Belief that honour killings are 'justified' still prevalent among Jordan's next generation, study shows", Cambridge University Press, 20th June 2013.

[20] UNFPA/COSIT/KRSO/Ministry of Youth and Sport Iraq, *National Youth Survey 2009*.

[21] Ashenafi Moges. "What is behind the tradition of FGM?", *African Women Organisation*. See: http://www.african-women.org/documents/behind-FGM-tradition.pdf

million girls and women are living with the consequences of FGM, which include infections, complications in pregnancy and childbirth, psychological damage, and sexual dysfunction[22].

Forced marriage

When girls are perceived as commodities to be used to preserve honour, they can be forced to marry a man of their family's choice. Over 60 million women (now aged 20 – 24) in the world have been subjected to forced marriage[23] and 142 million girls are predicted to be the victims of child marriage over the next decade[24]. Child marriage is one of the primary causes of maternal mortality and morbidity, claiming the lives of more than 1,000 women and young girls every day. In countries like Bangladesh, Central African Republic, Chad, Guinea, Mali, and Niger the rate of early and forced marriage is 60% or higher[25]. This form of honour preservation enslaves women and girls and often violates their rights to health, education, non-discrimination and freedom from physical, psychological and sexual violence.

Conclusion and recommendations

Despite international humanitarian law proscribing gender-based violence, honour violence is committed across the world, often with impunity; and despite the widespread and severe nature of the violence, cases remain underreported.

We ask the Council to encourage those states with no legislation relating to honour violence, to pass laws recognising it as a crime, and to provide for penalties commensurate with the gravity of the acts committed.

Legislative change accompanied by law enforcement is central to helping combat honour crimes throughout the world, but this needs to be complemented by the education and emancipation of women. We call on the Council to encourage the consistent use of rights-based discourse when addressing the killings of women. In her excellent report, the Special Rapporteur on violence against women highlighted honour violence and contributed to the much-needed awareness-raising of the issue. We urge the Council to continue highlighting the causes and consequences of honour violence in order to further encourage societal and cultural transformation.

Overall, more attention needs to be paid to the concept of "honour", how it is perceived and the issues surrounding it (such as the control of women and their sexuality). These surrounding issues need to be investigated and confronted. Honour-based violence represents a form of systematic institutionalized misogyny; the international community has a duty to do far more to combat it.

---

[22] http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs241/en/
[23] http://www.unicef.org/media/media_45451.html
[24] http://www.icrw.org/child-marriage-facts-and-figures
[25] http://www.plan-uk.org/early-and-forced-marriage/